

Advice to Patients on Completion of their Radiotherapy Treatment



This leaflet is a **general guide** covering some of the main side effects that patients may experience following radiotherapy. **It is important to remember that you will not experience all of these side effects. Radiotherapy only affects the area being treated.** You can find more detailed information about your treatment and side effects in your cancer specific information leaflet.

Radiotherapy continues to work for around 10-14 days after your treatment finishes. During this time, some people find that any side effects they have experienced during treatment may become more noticeable or even slightly worse. Depending on your course of treatment, some people may not experience any side effects until after radiotherapy has finished. Please note that this is quite normal. Side effects may continue for a few weeks, but should gradually settle.

Common side effects

Tiredness/lack of energy

Many people feel tired during radiotherapy treatment and for several weeks or months afterwards. It is important to try to continue your normal daily activities and interests. Research has shown that gentle exercise is beneficial for people who have had a cancer diagnosis both in the short and longer term.

A sensible balance between rest and activity may be best.

Skin reaction

Some people experience a skin reaction due to their treatment. The skin in the treated area may become sore and red (similar to sunburn), darker than normal or dry and itchy. Sometimes the skin can break and become weepy. This is more common in areas where there is a skin fold, for example under the breast, arm pit or groin area.

Skin changes usually start 2-3 weeks after treatment begins, and can worsen when treatment finishes. Skin should start to improve 2-3 weeks after treatment ends. If your skin is broken it can take a little longer.

How should I look after my skin?

As long as your skin is not broken, continue looking after your skin as you were doing during treatment. Once any reaction has settled, you can go back to your normal skin care routine.

If your skin started to break while you were on treatment, the radiotherapy nurses at the Beatson will have provided you with appropriate dressings. You will also have been given a letter for your GP with information about these dressings. Your GP will prescribe a further supply if needed.

The nurses will also have asked you to make an appointment with the nurse at your GP to allow them to assess and monitor your skin. We recommend you attend the nurse at your GP practice a minimum of once a week if your skin is broken. You should also attend if you have signs of infection (increasing heat, pain, discharge or odour).

If your skin breaks once treatment has finished, it is important that you stop using moisturisers on this area. You will require an appropriate treatment. You will need to see your GP or practice nurse. Please take this booklet with you and show them the information listed on the next page:

Information for GPs, District Nurses and Practice nurses

If the skin is broken, advise to stop moisturising and provide appropriate gel and dressings.

We recommend:

- **Hydrogel (Activheal hydrogel, Askina, Intrasite).**

To be used with:

- **Soft polymer dressing with absorbent pad.**
- **Hydrophilic polyurethane matrix dressing with surfactant moisturiser (glycerol).**
- **Examples: Mepilex lite, Kliniderm or PolyMem dressings.**

Paraffin and petroleum jelly-based products should not be used.

Dressings placed on radiotherapy treated skin must be non-adhesive, or made with a suitable adhesive coating such as silicone. If dressings need to be secured in place, consider bandaging. Tape must be avoided.

A yellow / green coloured discharge (exudate) that is naturally produced by the body may settle over the damaged skin. This is a normal part of the healing process, but if an infection is suspected a swab can be taken. The exudate is normally absorbed by the dressing. It does not need to be changed until the outer layer of the dressing looks stained.

This exudate can often be mistaken for a fungal infection, but anti-fungal creams should be avoided unless confirmed as a fungal infection.

The skin should be monitored until healed. This normally takes 1-2 weeks.

Hair loss

Hair loss may occur in the treated area. The hair will usually start to grow back a few months after your treatment finishes. It may be a different texture or colour than before.

We would advise that you don't dye your hair until any skin reaction has settled down. We would recommend that you have a skin patch test before any hair treatments.

Occasionally, hair loss can be permanent. The NHS can provide a wig. Please speak to your doctor if this would be of interest to you.

There are some side effects which we know can occur when certain areas of the body are treated. These are listed below. Please remember, this is a general guide.

- **Treatment to your brain or near your stomach may cause nausea**

Some people feel sick during or shortly after radiotherapy. If you feel sick, please see your GP who may be able to prescribe some anti-sickness medication.

- **Treatment to your pelvis may cause a bladder infection (cystitis)**

Radiotherapy to the pelvis can irritate your bladder and for some people result in a urine infection. You may notice:

- » An increase in how often you need to pass urine.
- » A feeling of pressure in your lower abdomen area.
- » Burning or pain when going to the bathroom.
- » Cloudy urine.
- » Blood in your urine.
- » Strong smelling urine.

If you notice these symptoms, you should see your GP who will test a sample of your urine. If your sample tests positive for bacteria, you will need antibiotics.

- **Treatment to your tummy or pelvis may cause diarrhoea**

Most people who will be troubled by diarrhoea will have had it while on treatment. You may have already been advised to follow a low fibre diet or be taking anti-diarrhoea medication. Continue to do this until your symptoms improve. Please speak to your GP if your symptoms haven't settled after a few weeks or if you notice blood in your stools.

- **Treatment to your head and neck or chest area may cause problems eating and drinking**

This can be due to a sore and dry mouth/throat, reduced appetite and difficulty swallowing. Food may taste unpleasant. You may experience weight loss.

Try to avoid spicy, acidic, salty or sharp foods. Don't have food or drink too hot or too cold. You might find a softer diet is easier. Try to eat foods you enjoy and eat frequent small meals. It can also help to increase the amount of calories in your food by using full fat products.

If pain is making it difficult for you to eat, you are concerned about your weight loss, or if your appetite hasn't improved within a few weeks, see your GP for advice.

If you have any of the effects listed above that aren't due to your radiotherapy treatment, you should contact your GP.

Follow up

You will be seen by your oncology doctor 4-12 weeks after finishing radiotherapy. This appointment will be at the hospital where you first met your doctor (either at the Beaston or at your local hospital). If you haven't received an appointment within this time, please contact your doctor's secretary who can check this for you.

Contacts

The Beatson Cancer Centre has a **Radiotherapy Advice Line** available for patients who have completed treatment. This is an answer phone service, available Monday – Friday. Please leave your name, date of birth and telephone number and a radiographer will call you back as soon as possible.

☎ **0141 301 7432**

The Cancer Centre also has a **Cancer Treatment Helpline for urgent calls**. This is for patients **on or within 6 weeks of treatment who have urgent or severe** symptoms such as:

- Shivering or flu like symptoms
- Temperature greater than 37.5°C
- Gum/nose bleeds or unusual bruising
- Worsening or sudden breathlessness
- Leg weakness/difficulty walking
- Severe nausea/vomiting/diarrhoea/constipation
- Sudden increased or uncontrolled pain
- Other concerning symptoms associated with your cancer treatment

The line is available 24 hours for emergencies, although it would be helpful if you called early in the day if this is at all possible.

For Urgent Calls Tel:

Beatson 8am-8pm ☎ 0141 301 7990

National 8pm-8am ☎ 0800 917 7711

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